

King of Uruk, the strongest of men, and the personification of all human virtues. An unstable compound of two parts god and one part man, Gilgamesh suffers most from immoderation. A brave warrior, fair judge, and ambitious builder, Gilgamesh surrounds the city of Uruk with magnificent walls and erects its glorious ziggurats, or temple towers. Yet until Enkidu, his near equal, arrives to serve as a counterweight to Gilgamesh's restless energies, he exhausts his subjects with ceaseless battle, forced labor, and arbitrary exercises of power. Abruptly abandoning glory, wealth, and power, all of which are worldly aspirations that he as king had once epitomized, he begins a quest to learn the secret of eternal life. What he finds instead is the wisdom to strike harmony with his divine and mortal attributes. Two-thirds god and one-third mortal, Gilgamesh is undone by grief when his beloved companion Enkidu dies, and by despair at the prospect of his own extinction. Beautiful to behold, Gilgamesh selfishly indulges his appetites, raping whatever woman he desires, whether she is the wife of a warrior or the daughter of a noble—or a bride on her wedding night. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh grieves deeply and is horrified by the prospect of his own death. He is the fiercest of warriors and the most ambitious of builders. Reconciled at last to his mortality, Gilgamesh resumes his proper place in the world and becomes a better king. He is the greatest of all men, and both his virtues and his flaws are outsized. Enkidu's friendship calms and focuses him.